

Monster by Iris Violetta

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Summary: "The gate...I opened it. I'm the monster."

Monster

Hopper was at the station when it happened: a booming in the distance, a shaking of the ground and a strange pressure in the air. It was quick but there was no missing it. He wondered if it was an earthquake, although an earthquake in Indiana was incredibly rare.

Immediately the calls came pouring in, all concerned citizens. Luckily it seemed that nothing was majorly damaged and no one hurt. Only a town full of confused people.

"Are you sure it wasn't an earthquake?"

"Are they testing nukes at the lab?"

"It's the apocalypse, I'm telling you."

After almost an hour of this, Flo rapped on his door and told him that Joyce was on the line. Knowing she would be asking as well, he picked up the line and skipped the greeting.

"Joyce, we have no idea what it was but we're working on it."

"Jim," she rasped before taking a deep breath. Hopper froze. "Jim" meant business. "Jim" meant something was terribly, terribly wrong. Her voice was shaky and her words rushed.

"I found El out on the road. Something is wrong. She's completely out of it. She was barely walking straight and, and *babbling*. Just nonsense."

"Did she hit her head?"

"I checked but I couldn't find any wound. Maybe she does have a concussion, but I don't think that's it. Her nose is bloody and," she dropped her voice to a whisper. "Her hands are *covered* in blood. And I don't think it's hers."

"Okay, stay put. I'll be right there."

"Please hurry."

Hopper was thankful for the police lights as he sped toward the house. It was his home now too, since he moved in not too long after El returned four years ago. And it was his family now: Joyce, the boys, Eleven. He had briefly thought about her after the "earthquake," curious if she had anything to do with it. Now he was all but certain it was her.

When he got there Joyce was pacing the hall, waiting for him. She looked at him with wet eyes and desperation. "She's in the bathroom with Will. She won't get in the shower, she won't let me help her change. She won't...she won't *talk* to me, Jim." Her voice cracked and she placed a hand over her mouth.

In the bathroom, El was slumped in the corner, eyes glazed, bloodstains on her shirt. Shaking her head back and forth, muttering under her breath. Will sat next to her, her hand in his and fear on his face. Hopper squatted down before them and tried to get her attention, but her eyes wandered.

"She's in shock."

"Will, honey, do you know anything?" Joyce asked from the doorway.

"She and Mike went for a walk. On the tracks." The corners of his mouth twitched down. "I don't know where Mike is."

"El? Eleven." She finally looked Hopper in the eye. "Where is Mike?"

Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "Gone, gone, gone." She paused. "I'm the monster." And then she giggled, a hollow, brittle sound. As if she couldn't believe herself. As if she didn't.

The other three looked at each other, a feeling of dread knotting in each of their stomachs. Hopper sighed and pulled Joyce into the hall.

"I'm gonna go look for him."

She merely nodded and squeezed his hand before he left.

Hopper started where Joyce had found El, then made his way toward the tracks. He thought it would take longer to find anything but soon there it was: a body crumpled in the fallen leaves. He had a flash of

Will's fake body in the water, of Sarah's still body in the hospital bed. Steeling himself, he walked closer.

It was the Wheeler boy all right. Eyes open and lifeless, no pulse. Dried blood trailing from his nose, his ears, his eyes. There were streaks across his face, probably from El's fingers. Hopper felt sick and looked away, grabbing at a branch to steady himself. He'd seen the bodies of the agents in the school that night, blood trailing in just the same way. No wonder the girl was so disturbed.

He tried not to think about what Karen's face would look like when he gave her the news. And part of him wished that someone else could do it. But he knew that he was the best person - he of all people understood.

Later, after backup and the ambulance arrived; after photos were taken and the body removed; after sitting for a full ten minutes outside the Wheeler house, trying to find the courage to go to the door; after trying not to choke up when he saw the light leave Karen's eyes, knowing they would never quite be the same; after pulling over on Mirkwood and crying against the steering wheel; he finally made it back home.

Joyce sat on El's bed with the girl's head in her lap, having finally gotten her into the bath, into clean pajamas. Will had long disappeared into his room. Joyce stroking her hair, El stared at the ceiling, mumbling to herself. "Gone, gone."

Hopper stood in the doorway, watching them in the dim light. El looked even younger than she was. And though he hated himself for thinking it, he wondered deep down...if she could do this to Mike, she could do it to any of them. The way Joyce's eye locked with his, he knew she was thinking the same thing.

"Monster, monster..."